THE SANTA FE TRAIL.

By MRS. J. K. HUDSON.

I.

"Where on airth hev you been?"

The old Santa Fe Trail, the scene of so many exploits of daring and suffering, is now an obliterated path. What we are wont to call "The March of Progress" and "The Spread of Civilization," have blurred it past following step by step over the prairies and mountains of the west, but the long track is still blazed here and there by prominent points—bloody massacres and other historic incidents—so that one cannot deviate far if he undertake to follow it.

It would not be wise, however, to set out upon this journey by any of the methods of travel that were in use when the Santa Fe Trail was the scene of a great traffic—with ox team plodding heavily and slowly, by which the pioneer emigrant moved on; nor on foot with pack upon back, as the forty-niners traveled. It would be hard to follow the trail so. The only highway that will take you over nearly the same route is the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad. If it is not convenient to buy a ticket on that line and you have no pass, then get a map of the region west of the Mississippi and put your index finger down at what was once Westport Landing, now Kansas City, Missouri. That is the starting point of our story.

The old trading town of Westport was for a long time the eastern limit of the Santa Fe Trail. It lay high on the bluffs, six or seven miles from the sand bar where St. Louis steamers landed their cargoes. Beyond the town, westward, and over the Kansas line, the United States government had set apart a stretch of country for the use of Santa Fe trains, on which they encamped and corraled their worn out oxen. Here the poor beasts rested, fed upon the rich prairie grass and recuperated strength for the long return journey over the plains to Santa Fe. The drivers of these unwieldly ox teams were mostly Mexicans, speaking no language but their own profane Spanish and looking sullenly out from under their sombreros and their tangled black hair. They and the wagon masters slept and ate in camp and drank at the trading post, while the head buyers went on to St. Louis to lay in a stock of goods adapted to the markets of the mysterious country that was long ago conquered by Spain and then forgotten of men. Sometimes these trains had a long time to wait for the journey to St. Louis, and the return voyage up the mud shifting Missouri was tedious and of uncertain duration.

In the summer of eighteen hundred and fifty-one many corrals dotted the uplands of the prairie on the reserve near Westport, and the herds of cattle belonging to them grazed in the valleys, lay on the sun slopes, and drank from the half dry creeks that wound through the hills toward the Kaw. They had grown sleek and fat, their gaunted sides were filled out and their appealing ribs were buried in flesh, so long had they waited for a cargo.

Even the lazy teamsters were growing restless, and the wagon masters were anxious to start westward while the grass was in good condition. All were listening for the steamer's whistle that could be plainly heard at the post when the wind was from the north, but they did not trust to that for information of the boat's arrival. Couriers were constantly going back and forth to and from the landing on the fleet footed Mexican ponies that accompanied all ox trains on the Santa Fe Trail for the use of outriders, scouts and messengers. "No boat" was the word they brought back day after day, until one hot afternoon when the sunshine quivered over the prairie like the breath of a furnace, and no breeze so much as stirred the long grass in the sloughs. The cattle lay panting on the uplands, and the Mexicans were stretched out in the shade of the wagons.

Suddenly a grateful north wind came swirling among the grass, breaking the siesta of the summer day in an instant, and almost upon its first wave came the sound of the boat's whistle. The camp was alert at once. Ponies were saddled and mounted and went dashing from corral to corral, and then away to the town and the landing.

Wagon Master King was an American, a "states" man, and spoke both English and Spanish. He was of uncertain age, because of his brown, unkempt, frontiersmanlike appearance, and yet rather young than old. He had been one of the most impatient for the boat to come, and now he was among the first to catch a pony and spur it off down the hillside toward the river. Just how he differed from the others of this unimportant party it would be difficult to tell; perhaps most markedly in a slight aloofness, a feeling that had led him to make a bridle path through the woods that lay between Westport town and the landing, and to follow it whenever he had ridden down to the river rather than the wagon road used by the trains. When the boat's whistle was heard he started off in great haste, and as usual turned into the bypath, while a dozen or more men kept on in the road. This path had come to be called in derision the "King's highway," and as the wagon master turned into it the other riders called out to him:

"Come on by the big road this time, you can go faster and will get there sooner if it is longer."

The trainmaster hesitated. But apparently upon second thought he kept on in the "King's highway," and only a volley of oaths in Mexican-Spanish and western English followed him. The bunch of mottled and red and claybank ponies rushed pellmell down the wagon road, their riders clanking heavy spurs, swinging broad brimmed hats, uttering Indian war whoops, throwing themselves from side to side, racing and crowding the swift and sure footed little animals to the landing.

There all was excitement. The Polar Star was already being made fast to the huge cottonwood stumps that hung over the water. She was loaded down so that the water had washed her deck and sides a grimy mud color. Her mixed and indescribable freight was piled high on every side in anything but shipshape. Her passengers were all crowded forward, anxious to get ashore, and their faces were of every color and type. Miners, soldiers, Yankees, traders, gamblers, adventurers, negroes, army officers, emigrants and a few women came over the gang plank in a motley procession. Greetings were exchanged by some with men in the crowd on the bank; others stood aside and looked on, stretching themselves as if just released from a cramped position, and then looking about for the settlement.

Many of the passengers of the Polar Star chose to walk out to Westport; some hired Mexican ponies and mounted them cautiously, having heard of the bucking broncho afar off; others took passage in the "schooner" drawn by six creeping oxen, and all started over the hills to the trading post, except those who were to help unload the cargo and bring up the supplies for Westport.

The Mexican buyers ordered the wagon trains down in haste, the boat's long delay making them impatient to start out. The captain had been ordered to wait for United States troops bound to Fort Leavenworth; then the Polar Star had grounded on a sand bar when she was six days out from St. Louis; her supply of fuel at a certain landing was not ready, and she was obliged to wait while cord wood from three miles inland was hauled to her. One detention after another, together with her heavy cargo, made her trip a slow one, but no serious accident had befallen her and the freight for the overland trains was landed in good condition.

As the straggling procession was about to start up the hill the captain of the Polar Star noticed a woman standing alone and looking in a dazed and frightened way, first at the boat and then at the caravan. He remembered her well, for, to use the phrase of his own thoughts, he had "had his eye on her" throughout the voyage from St. Louis.

She had come aboard late at that city with her passage paid to Westport Landing. There, she had afterward explained, she would be met by a friend. Being a quiet, modest, plain little body, the officers' wives who were aboard the boat took kindly to her and befriended her throughout the trip. They were somewhat curious, to be sure, concerning the "friend" who would meet her; very reasonably, too, since it was an almost unheard of and certainly a venturesome thing for a woman to start up country on a Missouri river steamboat in those early days. But her manner, and perhaps what she did not say more than anything she said, prevented close inquiry. The wife of a captain of artillery, who "ranked" all the others, gave it out as her opinion that one of two things must be the true explanation. Either the lone woman had been deserted by her husband and was not quite sure that he would keep his promise to meet her at Westport Landing, or she expected to join an old lover and be married there.

More than once, when the woman sat on the deck of the Polar Star and gazed across the muddy waters of the river into the young cottonwood groves beyond, a pathetic look crept into her face that warranted the first theory. Again a trustful hope would shine through her gray eyes and convince her new friends of the latter explanation.

The captain's attention had been especially attracted to her by a little scene of which he believed himself to be the only witness. Soon after she came aboard his boat at St. Louis, and while he was watching her with some suspicion and wondering that a woman of her appearance should start upon such a journey alone, he saw her face grow suddenly white. They were both well forward at the time, but the woman was walking toward the stern of the vessel, and it was evident to the captain that she was startled by something she saw there amid the crowd of passengers—deckhands and soldiers—all engaged in assorting and arranging the stacks of freight and luggage. This keen observer of strange people turned quickly and looked in the same direction with the woman's eyes, but he could not determine what it was that had caused the blood to leave her face. She made no attempt at concealment and was plainly in no way disguised. Of these things the old captain made mental note and then wisely decided to bide his time.

But as the voyage progressed and the woman gave no sign, the captain was puzzled. He said to himself: "She knows where she is going and what she is about and she intends to keep her own counsel. It's wonderful what a quiet bit of a woman will undertake when she makes up her mind to it. Her courage is like the patient man's anger when at last aroused." And the old captain sighed a long, deep sigh and kept his own counsel.

Although he, too, had been curious concerning her "friend," he was not greatly surprised to see her standing alone after the passengers were all landed from the Polar Star. He approached her just as the officers' wives, who were in the great wagon ready to ascend the hill, espied her, and called to her to join them.

"Nobody met me," she said to the captain as he came up, and, though the words had a lonely sound, he was puzzled anew at the tone, and the expression he fancied he detected for an instant in her face was one of relief rather than disappointment.

"The ladies are going up to see the town," the captain explained; "perhaps you had better go along."

The woman had learned from the officers' wives while aboard the Polar Star that their husbands and a portion of the troops were destined to Fort Leavenworth, fifty miles farther up the river, and that the remainder of the soldiers, under command of a sergeant, would disembark at Westport Landing and accompany the Santa Fe trains westward as far as Fort Dodge. The captain helped the mysterious passenger into the train wagon, where she was immediately plied with questions:

"What can you do?"

"Where will you go?"

"What do you suppose has prevented your friend from meeting you?"

"It seems unpardonable in such a place as this!" and much more was said.

To all of which the little woman simply replied that she did not know.

After dinner had been served at the tavern, and the military officers had taken their wives out to the corrals to see the Mexicans, and the wagon trains, and the prairies, and it was time to return to the landing, the women turned to their companion of the voyage and asked her if she would go with them to the fort, adding that she could probably find employment there in some officer's family or she could return by the boat to St. Louis. To their consternation she answered that she was going on to Santa Fe. One of the wagon masters had his wife with him, and she had already bargained with her for the trip.

There was nothing to do but to say goodby, wish the woman a safe journey and success in her errand. After the departure of her friends the lone traveler immediately took up her abode in camp with the wagon master's wife. There all was activity and bustle, preparations for the journey were going forward on every side, though it would be two or three days, they said, before the packing could be completed and all made ready. Many of the trains were on the way to the landing, others were already down by the levee receiving their loads and the remainder were preparing to start.

All save one. At King's corral the oxen were standing idly about, and the stupid Mexicans were looking along the many little trails that converged toward Westport, and up and down the "King's highway," but no wagon master was in sight for them. In half an hour a well dressed Mexican galloped up to them on a mustang, hurling native oaths at their dogged faces and cruel, black eyes. The "greasers" fell to work and jabbed the unoffending cattle as they yoked them up.

"It is a bad piece of business," said the wagon master's wife to her guest, companion or servant (she could not define the position which the strange woman occupied in her mind and her family). "The man King went off with the others to see the boat come in and nobody hain't seed him sence. Leastways he started down the trail he made hisself over the hill yander, an that's the last of him. It's more like a Mexican to act that away, an the men folks say King seemed like a right decent feller."

The stranger said nothing, but busied herself about the cooking she had volunteered to assist with. Some one was recruited or promoted to the vacant wagon mastership and the packing went on.

The next day when the wagon master's wife arose from her siesta under the wagon, she saw the strange woman coming toward the corral along the "King's highway." When she drew near and sat down in the grass quite out of breath, her hostess said:

"Where on airth hev you been? I missed you the minute I got awake. You hain't been out jest to pick them flowers, hev you? Jest you wait twell we git out on the perarah where there's been no grazin to speak of if you want to see flowers."

The wagon master's wife never knew to a certainty just what became of the flowers that were gathered on the "King's highway," but she took it for granted they were thrown away after she had imparted the information of finer ones to come.

II.

"Who knows it wasn't that woman?"

Spread out the map again. Put your finger down at the town of Great Bend, in southern Kansas, on the Arkansas river. Annihilate by a backward step of forty years all signs of the white man's presence that now lie so thick throughout the length and breadth of this fertile valley of the "Nile of Kansas"—the mysterious stream whose mountain fed waters are said to flow more below ground than above.

Picture a vast rolling prairie covered with all the shades of grass that ever grew. Fresh and spring green in the sloughs, lush and long and June green on the river margins, burned brown on the southern slopes and misty and gray on the uplands where the buffalo grass spreads. The river is hidden by it. Higher than a man's head the rank grass waves in every passing breeze or stands motionless in the August sun. To the water's very edge the traveler must go to look upon its slow sliding flood.

Down from the higher lands, north and south, come narrow paths worn by the feet of the mighty buffalo as he journeys with the seasons and halts and stamps at the river brink while he slakes his thirst. His "wallows" dot the uplands here and there—bare, round patches ten or twelve feet across, where his lordship has rolled and turned on every journey till the tough sod is worn through and not a spear of grass sprouts.

At right angles to these deep, slim paths run the Santa Fe Trail; at times near the brink of the river, again cutting across a loop from bend to bend, and then climbing to the highlands to avoid a marsh or deep ravine.

Along its track is strung a long cavalcade, the returning Santa Fe train for the summer of eighteen hundred and fifty-one. Rows of immense covered wagons, four abreast, and drawn by many yoke of oxen, weary plodders with heads downbent and heavy yokes rubbing their galled necks. Pack mules with their tight padded panniers strapped on their sides and their huge ears flapping in time with their trim feet. Broncbos with gay, careless riders, and with none, nipping the tenderest tufts of grass and weed tops that are to their liking. Frontiersmen with furtive eye and ever ready rifle, clad in buckskin and cottonade of indescribable cut. United States infantry in decidedly undress uniform, weary of the march and thirsty for war—Indians, Spaniards, ambush, partisans, they said, to break the monotony of sun and heat, the climbing of one "rise" to see another beyond, and the never ending sea of grass. Stragglers from nobody knew whence, going nobody knew where. The nameless hangers on, outcasts and speculators in whatever was easily carried and could be dishonestly won.

Of little children there are none, thank heaven; though two young women live in one of the middle trains—safer there, the captain thinks. The wagon in which they ride is garlanded with flowers. The year is nearing its autumn, and the season of yellows and purples has come. Goldenrod feathers the ground over acres and acres, and stands in solid rows of crinkled gold along the broken lines of the trail. Tall, purplish flower spikes bend stiffly before the south wind, like bayonets in armored hands, and shake a spicy perfume from the sensitive plant at their feet. Here and there a clump of fringed gentian hides behind a screen of compass weed; and the modest cyclamen, the violet of autumn, turns its sweet white face down toward its own heart leaves, blushes a tender pink, fades, twists its stalk into a spiral and bends to earth to deposit its ripened seeds, where they may be cherished by its own substance. All these blossoms and many more, twined with the black and reddish water grasses, hang from the dusty wagon bows. But now the flower beds are almost past, buffalo grass stretches for many miles ahead, and then the desert sand, alkali dust and cactus.

The wagon master's wife told her companion what was before them and bade her cherish her flowers well. She did for their own sakes. But in the folds of her only other gown, between the leaves of a prayer book that had seen better days, were the blossoms she plucked along the "King's highway" on the Missouri hills, and none of these latter ones were ever put with them.

The trains had been out now many days. More than a hundred miles back, at Council Grove, on the Neosho river, they had halted for organization. That point was the final rendezvous for west bound trains. There they elected a commander for the expedition and beyond that point the wagons never fell out of their regular order in the line of march.

Four long, toiling teams moved constantly forward side by side. Then four more came on abreast, and so to the end. This arrangement was for the purpose of better protection against hostile Indians, for whom a constant lookout was kept, and with whom encounters were not unknown by the traders, though treaties had been made by the government with every tribe through whose territory the Santa Fe Trail ran, by the terms of which all trains were to pass along its track unmolested. That the government entertained a doubt of the Indians holding to this compact was evidenced by the fact that the great road, 800 miles long, was made 300 feet wide, so that the caravans might be kept compact and defensible.

The delay at Council Grove had been longer than usual, owing to the difficulty of agreeing upon a captain. It developed that there had been a tacit understanding to elect Wagon Master King to that responsible position, and his sudden and complete disappearance left the company at a loss for a competent head, or at least for one in whom they all had confidence. The place obviously required a man of nerve and quick decision, but above all he must be possessed of well known fighting qualities. King had a reputation as an Indian fighter, and although he was not a favorite personally, it was conceded that he could be trusted and that he would be brave in the face of danger.

"What do you suppose ever took King off, anyhow?" said one of the men, after they had canvassed the subject repeatedly and yet had not agreed upon a captain. His question seemed to be addressed to the camp in general, and after a moment's silence and the usual puzzling of brows whenever the lost wagon master's name was mentioned, a soldier who was lying on the grass raised upon his elbow and said:

"I don't know as you have asked me, but I believe this man you are talking about went away because he saw somebody aboard the Polar Star that he didn't want to meet. Who knows it wasn't that woman?"

The men looked at the speaker in blank astonishment, but no one contradicted him. It was the first probable solution that had been offered, and naturally it was not long in finding lodgment in every man's mind. Then one added:

"He was afeard, and watched, hey? Likely enough!" And another said:

"Smart feilow; but he's no coward."

The repacking done, after the jolting and settling of the freight between Westport and Council Grove, and the cattle winded and refreshed, it became necessary to decide upon a captain and go on. An old Mexican plainsman was chosen—a man who had made many overland journeys, had seen much hazardous service and could speak broken English and a number of Indian languages, besides Spanish. But he had never before commanded an expedition across the plains. Just why, nobody seemed to know, or to be willing to say.

Perhaps because of an undefined fear that in a pinch he would "flunk." It seemed to be his due that he should once have the honor of commanding a train, and though these overland mariners were not men to take great risks for honor's sake, they ventured a little this time and elected old Jose Valdez to the captaincy. With a great show of loyalty the crown of authority was put upon his brow, and many of his followers protested that they had long wished to see the thing done.

Happy old Jose! he started the expedition with a flourish. His glittering black eyes danced, for they had not yet lost their luster, and they could see a moving object on the plains farther away than many that were a score of years younger.

"His pride would make him do his best," they said; "everything would be safe."

And his pride did spur the old captain constantly. It aroused his ambition to make the quickest trip that had been known for years, to have the most comfortable camping grounds, and the best time generally. Occasionally he would bring his mind back to duty with a start because he had discovered himself in Santa Fe, recounting the success of the expedition under his leadership to his stay-at-home comrades, into whose ears he had hoped for ten years to be able to pour this proud tale.

From Council Grove to the great bend of the Arkansas every thing had moved along just to his liking. It was at this point that the trail struck the river whose course they would follow for a hundred and fifty miles. They had rounded the point and were bearing more toward the south. Pawnee rock would be the next camping place. This rock is one of nature's ramparts. A rugged, isolated pile of brown sandstone cropping out of the prairie many miles from the foothills of the Rocky mountains, it is the first startling guideboard to the great range. For many years—at least half a century—it was known as one of the most dangerous points on the plains. Almost within its shadow the Santa Fe Trail crosses the route of the Indian tribes that traveled both north and south after buffalo. Probably for hundreds of years before the Santa Fe Trail was used by white traders and trappers this great north and south trail was followed by the hunters of the prairie tribes.

But a few miles away from the rock the Pawnee river empties into the Arkansas, and the banks of both streams afforded fine camping grounds. The grazing was good in the valleys and the rock afforded protection from foes and shelter from wind and fire. Whoever first gained its summit was almost impregnably fortified against enemies so long as supplies of food and water and arrows or ammunition lasted. Many men whose names are now conspicuous in the history of this country have spent anxious days and nights on Pawnee rock, and but a few years ago many names could be read upon its scarred face. In eighteen hundred and fifty-one hundreds of them, cut in the soft stone by hands that showed all degrees of civilization and semibarbarity, were graven in the base of this old landmark.

The camp site was selected just beyond rifle shot from the rock. The wagons were formed into a corral, and after the cattle had been watered at the river and herded on the banks in the grass during the long twilight, they were driven into the inclosure for the night. Captain Jose cast his searching eyes over the plains many times before night at last shut them out, but his glance always came back satisfied.

"I calkilate you kin turn in and sleep tonight, boys," said one of the American wagon masters, "from the way the old captain looks. Nary a red devil in sight, nor a sign of one."

"Yes," said another, "hit looks like fair sailin, but I reckon we'll all sleep better if we hev a good strong picket line out. These hyer is mighty dangerous parts, pardner. I've seed the time when I thought nothin couldn't tempt me back hyer agin."

"Well, don't tell us about it tonight," said a third, "we've got soldiers with us and we've had a long pull today; let's have a good night of it and take that yarn another time—it might give us bad dreams, you know, old chap."

Those who had never heard the story of the plainsman's adventure at Pawnee rock were disappointed to have it shut off in this summary manner by one who had listened to it on numerous previous trips, but all were weary from the day's march, and when the pickets were stationed for the first watch every man lay down with a restful sense of security. Nothing but the stars lighted the great plains and the little group of tired sleepers in the corral.

The fires had been put out or covered up before dark, and there was scarcely a sound even to betray the presence of the camp. Occasionally an ox moved a clumsy foot, or a driver in his heavy sleep called out a lusty "Wo haw, Buck," but the sentinels heard little, save the scampering of the night animals in the grass and now and then the far off bark of a coyote.

It must have been two hours after midnight. The "watch" had given place to the "relief" and all was still again. Suddenly one of the ponies whinnied, loud and clear, and two or three of his mates sniffed sharply and rose upon their feet. The noise did not waken many of the sleepers, but Captain Jose was up in an instant and making the rounds of the pickets.

They had heard nothing—seen nothing. The little half tamed broncho had startled them with a sudden sniff of the air and then the piercing call, as if to some of his kind beyond the reach of human senses, but within the knowledge of his—acute by heredity and a life that ranged over long distances undulled by confinement and disuse.

The entire camp was aroused. Silently and with the utmost caution they were told to prepare for defense. With the first ray of light Captain Jose said they might expect an attack from the Indians—either the Pawnees or Cheyennes. All the experienced plainsmen in the command agreed with him. It was not the first time they had been warned of the approach of the enemy by a Mexican pony. To be ready to repulse a swift and deadly onslaught from the stealthy dogs must be their tactics now, they said, and every man was posted rifle in hand and many rounds of ammunition in his belt. These precautions seemed overdone to the men who were making their first trip across the plains and to some of the raw recruits among the soldiers, but a short experience with the frontiersmen had already taught them that words are cheap coin in the estimation of that roving and hardy community and they wisely held their peace.

"Hist! hist!" from Captain Jose, who naturally fell into the dialect of the Mexican under excitement.

All eyes were bent into the grass as they had been directed an hour before. The gray light was sifting into the air but thinly as yet, and strain their vision as they might they could see but a few feet away. Still, as they looked it grew lighter and lighter, and the grass rustled, with a passing breeze, perhaps; or, was it a crouching form creeping on nearer and nearer—a dozen! a score! hundreds!

On every side the grass was alive with Indians, and simultaneously with Captain Jose's command to "fire!" they sprang forward yelling like demons and falling over one another in a frenzy of surprise and rage. The reception was too much for them; they fell back, leaving many dead and wounded within a few feet of the corral, a ghastly and writhing cordon about the barricade.

The Indians had planned a surprise for the camp. They thought to steal up to the corral and charge upon it so suddenly in the uncertain light that they could kill many of the freighters while yet upon the ground asleep. The old Mexican had outwitted them.

The green men under his command set up a shout of victory, but it was quickly checked.

"Save your breath," said a veteran of the trail, "the enemy is repulsed, but not vanquished, begorra! We may be here for days yit, and we may niver git out agin; the saints preserve us!"

Repulsed, but not vanquished; that was the situation comprehended instantly by every man familiar with Indian warfare.

Up through the now fast coming light shot a beacon of fire from the highest point of the great rock, the Indians' telegraph for ages, lighted on that same point for the summoning of friendly tribes before the white man ever crossed the Mississippi from the east or Coronado traversed the plains from the west. Higher and higher it blazed as the savages piled dried grass and brush on its bed. Long tongues of flame leaped up into the air, clouds of smoke rolled away over the prairie, and then it all died out as suddenly as it was kindled. The ashes of the light stuff blew away on the next wind that touched the top of the old rock, and before the rolling ball of smoke had melted into the nearest white floating cloud the beacon fire was out. But it had done its swift errand well.

The Indians down by the river and those on the rock, all now plainly visible from the corral, went calmly about the preparations for the morning meal. There were no squaws with the band and no lodge poles were carried; it was evidently a war party. Breakfast was made ready in the corral too. There was no hunger wherewith to season the food, but every man knew that he must eat to fortify himself for battle—perhaps that he might be able to summon courage to meet death bravely.

"There is the answering signal; yonder to the south," cried some one on the lookout.

Yes, there it was, a faint, unsteady pennon of blue smoke wavering in the wind. The Indians saw it, but made no sign—they knew it would come. The stolid meal went on, the wary eyes keeping watch only on the corral so that no white man might creep to the river or the springs for water.

Jose Valdez wore an anxious look. He had said that it would take the Indians at least four hours to come to the aid of the attacking band.

"Till thin," added the Irishman, "ye can slape or ate or make your wills, b'ys, as ye like. Pat Duffy will clane his gun and be ready for the divils, bad cess to thim."

Most of the command followed Pat's example and cleaned their rifles, but they could not joke nor make light of their predicament, it was too serious; that was plainly indicated by the faces of Captain Jose and the other old plainsmen.

III.

If an Indian had appeared in their midst it could not have surprised them more.

Sure enough, when the sun was about three hours high the captain's watchful eyes saw a moving spot on the prairie away to the southward. A shifting brown mass that rose on the ridges and descended again into the valleys, like a boat at sea coming in with the roll of the tide, constantly growing larger and coming nearer.

The field glass soon resolved the mass into mounted Indians on the gallop, flying over the prairie almost with the speed of the wind. A few more miles and the war paint could be seen upon their faces as they were upturned to the sun, their long, black hair streaming in the wind, and the feathers of their headdresses tossing from side to side. Some of them were cruel Spanish spurs with which they goaded the little beasts beneath them, and all came on pellmell, thirsty for paleface blood and traders' whisky.

Outriders from the camp on the Arkansas met the re-enforcements two or three miles out on the prairie, and evidently recounted to them the situation of the foe. A council of war was held, and in less than another hour the most demoniacal whoops and yells broke upon the ears of the listeners, and the Indians started toward the corral.

It is well known that for a long time back in the history of the west the wild Indians have been as well armed as any white men who encountered them. These bands were no exception. They carried exactly the same kind of rifles and many of them had revolvers. The only difference between the arms of the men in Jose Valdez' corral and those of the Indians outside was that the Indians carried bows and arrows in addition to their other weapons. The men in the corral were well supplied with ammunition, but it was not to be wasted, and Captain Jose cautioned them to make every shot count.

It would seem to one unfamiliar with Indian tactics that the corral had greatly the advantage, but it must be remembered that the instant the advancing line was within rifle shot every Indian threw himself on the side of his pony, hanging there out of sight with a bullet proof breastwork between him and his foe. The Indians fired under the horses' necks, and whenever a painted face or a leather fringed leg was visible a sure shot from the wagons struck it and its owner rolled over into the grass. A little nearer and a little nearer drew the death dealing coil as it circled around and around. The Indians were frenzied by the sight of their own dead, who had lain near the wagons since early morning, but they could not make a break in the barricade through which to rush upon the handful of men inside. That was what they expected to do and that was what the men in the corral feared they would do.

Whenever an Indian fell another took his place, and if possible he was carried away. There was a considerable force in reserve, about two hundred Indians in all, Captain Jose thought. But for the overwhelming numbers of the Indians and one other consideration the men in the corral would have been ordered to shoot the ponies and afterward their riders. This they could easily